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THE ◆ BRITISH ◆ COALITION ◆ FOR

EAST ◆ TIMOR

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Briefing on East Timor
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What might turn out to be a short-lived opportunity for the East Timorese to obtain their much sought independence is set to take place on August 8th.

The Governments of Portugal and Indonesia signed accords in New York on 5th May agreeing to modalities and security arrangements for a ballot on autonomy to be held, after the Indonesian elections of 7 June, on 8th August. UN officials are starting to arrive in East Timor to make the logistical arrangements. However, evidence points to the fact that while President Habibie is committed to the deal, the Indonesian armed forces intend to obstruct it in every possible way.

Security in the territory is poor, as Indonesian army backed militias are seeking to influence the outcome by terrorising independence supporters amongst the East Timorese population. The militias are composed of disaffected youth, criminals, West Timorese conscripts, regular soldiers in civilian dress and representatives of a small minority of East Timorese with a genuine stake in continuing East Timorese rule; many of the former groups have been bribed or coerced into joining. They have been the perpetrators of some of the worst violence, mass intimidation, and massacres East Timor has seen since the 1991 Santa Cruz Massacre. Several hundred people have been killed in East Timor since the 27th January announcement by the Habibie government that it might be prepared to 'let East Timor go'.

The militia leaders have so far benefited from army protection, and act with seemingly complete impunity, inciting violence and murder. Their one objective: to make certain that East Timorese people are too frightened to vote for independence (by rejecting 'autonomy') on August 8th. Death lists have been circulated containing the names of virtually all members of the National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT) as well as NGO and Human Rights Workers. This situation has not changed since a show 'peace agreement' was signed by the opposing factions, on 21st April nor since the arrival last week of UN officials. Indeed, incoming UN staff are also now being threatened.

The international response to the violence in East Timor, has, for once, been lucid and firm. High level diplomats, including the Irish Foreign minister, David Andrews, have accurately pin-pointed the source of the trouble, and made it clear to the Indonesian authorities that the army must be brought under control and persuaded to create the neutral conditions necessary for the ballot to take place. The question as to whether President Habibie has the capacity to do so, remains unanswered, but the signals are not encouraging. The British government has been particularly supportive of the East Timorese in its recent diplomatic intiatives. It is greatly to be regretted that the personal commitment to the East Timorese of the late deputy
foreign secretary, Mr Derek Fatchett, the first British Minister to visit East Timor since the Indonesian invasion, cannot be channelled into the massive international support now crucial to the successful outcome of the delicate peace process. Mr Fatchett visited East Timor at the end of April.

Sponsors: Lord Avebury (Hon President), Dr Peter Carey, Ann Clwyd MP, Rev Patrick A Kalilombe, Maureen Tolfree

With western attention still diverted by the Kosovo crisis, it is now essential that East Timor receives the international spotlight that should ensure a free and fair vote. The time-scale, given all that needs to happen, is extremely short.

The accords signed in New York provide for this. However, the fact that the Indonesian army, which is party to one side of the conflict in East Timor, is to be in charge of security, is naturally a cause for deep concern, and there are already indications that the accords are being broken on the ground, as the militias continue to intimidate and kill people. It may be that security conditions become so bad that the vote is aborted. But the East Timorese have endured crushing violence for 23 years, and the international solidarity community will take its cue from the East Timorese as to when and if the process should be denounced.

The accords provide a framework, including a confidential security agreement between the United Nations and the government of Indonesia, which is expected to govern events in East Timor between now and the 8 August vote. Xanana Gusmao, the jailed East Timorese Resistance leader has made it clear that the UN has a responsiblity to see that the accords are adhered to. The international community must accompany the UN in this task. A final wild card is the prospect of a newly elected Indonesian administration reneging on promises made by President Habibie. The British Coalition for East Timor has analysed the 5th May UN accords and can supply more detailed comments and monitoring criteria upon request[1]. For the benefit of brevity, we summarise the following critical points which parliamentarians may wish to push for through the usual parliamentary channels.

BCET recommends that the following points are specifically addressed in future advocacy:-

- Push for considerable reduction in numbers of the Indonesian army and the immediate disarmament of the armed militias.
- Ensure that international as well as domestic Indonesian pressure is kept on the Indonesia army to stay neutral, and that all intimidation is brought to an end.
- Push for the release all political prisoners, notably Xanana Gusmao, who should be allowed to return to East Timor in safety with fellow CNRT members to campaign freely.
- Insist that the Commission on Peace and Stability set up in Dili to oversee the process is chaired by the United Nations.
- Send as many independent monitors, including VIPs, as possible, from now until 8th August, with some staying on afterwards.
- Monitor the implementation of the accords and ensure that maximum publicity is accorded to every breach of them made by the Indonesian army/militias.
- Insist that all human rights violations, as well as individuals inciting violence are prosecuted under proper legal procedures.
- Ensure that international support, both practical and moral, is given to civil organisations in Indonesia and East Timor which are committed to seeing through the implementation of the accords.

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[1] Available from BCET upon request.